



Learning From the Masters

Casino exec worked for Wynn, Trump and Hilton

Dennis Gomes
President
Gomes Gaming Management

For Dennis Gomes, the victory lap continues. It's been two years since the revered executive stepped down as president of Aztar to launch his own management company in New Jersey. Gomes Gaming Management helps operators run casinos, comply with various regulations and enhance profitability.

The company may land Gomes a casino to own or simply a wealth of clients. Either way, he's happy.

"Frankly, I don't need the work," says a man who has excelled for nearly four decades in the business. "But, I still love the action. It's magical when you can think outside the box, come up with a concept and see it work. It's still great to be setting trends, not following them."

Gomes' trends have been cutting edge and his impact has been profound. As an educator, innovator, investigator and operator, he may have contributed more to the multi-billion dollar industry than anyone in history.

Gomes ran four properties, the Golden Nugget and Tropicana in his native Las Vegas and the Trump Taj Mahal and the Tropicana in Atlantic City. He also authored the rules governing the industry in those two key states. Gomes served as lead investigator for the Nevada Gaming Control Board and helped the New Jersey Division of Gaming Enforcement develop properly.

What he accomplished on opposite ends of the gaming spectrum is unparalleled. Gomes sanitized the business from mob infiltration, then worked within the regulations he wrote to revolutionize gaming markets.

Thus, the man who investigated New Jersey's first licensee, Resorts International,

later developed the largest non-gaming expansion in city history—the \$285 million Quarter at the Tropicana became a centerpiece of Atlantic City's resurgence. The Gaming Control Board executive whose investigation of the Stardust skimming operation inspired the movie *Casino*, later enhanced the fortunes of Donald Trump, Steve Wynn and Barron Hilton.

Through it all came a broad, engaging smile. Gomes enjoys the game, which starts with employees.

"What's always been important with me was the people," Gomes says. "Through love, kindness and sound business principles, you will succeed. I will have every employee reaching for his and her highest potential. If you empower people, make them realize they have nothing to fear, they will do anything to make sure they don't let you down. They will perform for you, because they love you."

Gomes looked like an unlikely operator early in his career. He appeared geared for a long tenure of showing regulators how to track company finances and spot unsavory ties. That changed when Gomes became convinced that one of his New Jersey investigations would be politically squashed. He departed that side of the business, returned home and brought future gaming heavyweight Kevin DeSanctis (former president of Sun International and Penn National Gaming, now head of Revel Entertainment) with him.

Another era was born. Gomes' masters in business now meshed with his bachelor's degree in accounting. Gomes' Vegas run included Major Riddle, the Frontier, the Hilton and Flamingo Hilton, Aladdin, the Dunes, Golden Nugget and, of course, Tropicana.

One of his success stories involved the Nugget, where he helped turn a 50 percent profit jump. Gomes never forgot the gratitude expressed by Wynn, his mentor.

"He called me to the coffee shop and said 'You did a great job with this place,'" Gomes says. "He said, 'I'm going to give you a little bonus.' Then he gives me a check for \$400,000. That was unbelievable. It was quite a reward. Steve Wynn is the most brilliant person I have ever known. I learned so much from him."

Gomes repeated the reward scenario at the Dunes. After turning the property from a \$10 million loser to \$6 million winner, Gomes paid his executives 40 percent of that total. At the Hilton, he schooled employees on how to expand their finances.

"When I started there, dealers weren't allowed to talk to customers," Gomes says. "I told them I wanted to teach them the soft hustle, how to line your pockets with money. You smile to customers, ask them how they are doing, be as friendly as can be, tell them what the great shows are in town, treat customers as if they were relatives coming into your home and not that you were just doing this for money."

"At that time, dealers were getting \$50 a day in tips. In a short period of time, it tripled."

Gomes never hesitated to send a strong message or correct a perceived wrong. One example of this came when he turned the tables on a questionable termination.

"There was a place with a provision that if a culinary employee missed a certain number of days, he's terminated, with no redress," Gomes recalls. "I had to approve terminations, and always hated them, so I called somebody in and

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asked why the waiter missed so many days. He didn't know, but this just bothered me. I called the guy on the phone. He said that five years ago, his wife gave birth to a little girl but his wife died during childbirth. He said he was the mother and father to this little girl and she had developed some health problems. When she had surgery, he had to stay overnight with her, so he could not leave. That's why he missed the time."

"I said, 'Fine, you are back to work. None of those absences count and if it happens again, you just take the days.'

"I called in the supervisor and went through the whole thing. I fired him, he was so cold-hearted. He didn't even care about this person. I didn't want anybody like that around. I wanted to set an example about how to care about individuals."

Before leaving Nevada, Gomes watched a transformation. Las Vegas reacted to competition. It diversified.

"I watched the industry follow the path that Atlantic City is on now," Gomes indicates. "When I was a kid, it was all gaming, no retail, no major food and beverage. Then we started to make that transition to provide more in retail, dining and entertainment. For a brief period, Las Vegas tried to become a family resort. Now they all say they didn't want that, but you had the water parks, the castles and the circuses. Now you have the big shows, the big malls, the big-name restaurants. There is more money being made in retail and dining than in gaming now."

Gomes' Atlantic City resume included record profits, a stint as president of the New Jersey Casino Association and a daring "unionization" of casinos that helped end an employee strike. For someone who apparently did it all, it could be time to slow down. But the buzz never stops. And the smile never fades.